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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001058

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TAGS: PREL PHUM TU

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL WRITER SAYS TURKISH/U.S. MISUNDERSTANDING
UNDERSTANDABLE

REF: A. ANKARA 2905

1B. 06 ISTANBUL 1669

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment. Many western ideas have not penetrated the Turkish mindset, including some as basic as limited government. This sometimes leads to misunderstandings between Americans and Turkish counterparts. Prevailing non-western ways of thinking often give life to conspiracy theories that are accepted as truth across economic, social and academic lines. Istanbul writer Mustafa Akyol recently amplified some of this with us. If, in this traditionally top-down society, limited government is not comprehensible to most Turks as he claims, conspiracy theories heard from boardrooms to kitchen tables make imminent sense. Any mental shift away from top-down authority formerly centered in the Sultan/Caliph is difficult at best. Those who try to make the shift are often accused of wanting to divide Turkey. This situation presents real challenges to Americans to first understand the contextual difference and then try to answer the conspiracy theory with a culturally effective counter argument. End summary and comment.

LIMITED GOVERNMENT - COME AGAIN

12. (C) Akyol, a writer for the Turkish Daily News and frequent contributor to U.S. publications, said one factor contributing to unease in U.S. - Turkish relations is that many western ideas have not penetrated Turkish society. A bilingual writer familiar with U.S. audiences, Akyol can step back from his own cultural context and see what others miss. One important concept that lacks currency is limited government. Akyol said that, in this traditionally top-down society, there isn't even a Turkish translation that adequately conveys the idea. One possible translation, "gecici hukumeti" literally means temporary government. For a contemporary example of how one Turkish bureaucrat views limited government, see Ref. A. In a society where the concept of limited government is not understood, the revelation that a "superpower" - which in the past, Turks knew in the form of the "great power" - may not hold all the cards in, say Iraq, is incomprehensible.

13. (C) As a practical application, the PKK has become a "great power" problem. Akyol recalled the Sheikh Said Piran rebellion of Kurds in 1925. Akyol says Turkish history books claim the British paid Said to rebel. Akyol argues there is no evidence for this, but "great power" intrusion was a useful excuse for the Kurdish rebellion, a situation that persists today. This reasoning makes it easy for Turks to conclude the "ultimate superpower," aka the United States,

must have a hand in PKK violence. The U.S. "uses this card" against Turkey, standard Turkish reasoning goes, to force Turkey to accept a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq, for example, or to ask for concessions on Cyprus.

AUTHORITY IN ISLAM WITHOUT THE CALIPH

¶4. (C) Akyol noted various Kurdish rebellions of the 1920s, which took place in the context of the abolishment of the Caliphate as well as the outlawing of tarikats (Muslim secret societies) in Turkey. Traditional Kurdish society, according to Akyol, reacted to these changes in the unifying role of religion in the state by substituting Kurdish nationalism as an overarching ideal.

¶5. (C) While many Shia turn to an Ayatollah for guidance in matters of faith, Sunni Muslims look to the guidance of scholars, according to Akyol. However, scholars do not ultimately determine the correct path as does an Ayatollah, especially in political matters. In Turkey, Muslim societies or "tarikats" had performed some of this role in matters of faith, but no longer. Akyol termed tarikats as old-fashioned and in any case, banned, perhaps a bit disingenuously. For while they are outlawed, people still seek them out - to find that overarching authority? (Ref B.) Akyol explained the Caliph used to rule in matters related to politics, but the Caliph always consulted with a sheikh for religious insight. Akyol said sheikhs are still a unifying authority in some instances. Charismatic leaders today gain a following through the Internet, he said. In Turkey, the Directorate General of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) is the continuation of the Caliphate, and needless to say, it seeks guidance neither from tarikats nor sheikhs.

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¶6. (C) Akyol lamented the lack of a religious authority today which could help resolve problems such as Palestine or Chechnya. The only solution now is to eliminate hate speech, not to redesign the Islamic faith, he argued. In prior days, if the sheikh directed followers to participate or not in certain actions, he could expect obedience - making the solution of even political problems "easier." Interestingly, for a Turk as readily conversant with western audiences and ideas as Akyol, the appeal of a unified authority to decide difficult issues remains the very strong default response.

WIENER